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FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1842

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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DEPT PLS PASS HHS AND CDC

FAS PLS PASS TO APHIS - ROSENBLUM AND HOWARD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KFLU TBIO EAGR SENV KHIV CASC IN PGOV

SUBJECT: AI IN W. BENGAL SITREP-8 - JANUARY 23: AI CONTINUES TO

SPREAD: CONFIRMED IN TWO NEW DISTRICTS OF COOCH BEHAR AND HUGLI

REF: KOLKATA 24 AND PREVIOUS

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: On January 23, confirmed avian influenza (AI) virus cases moved to within 20 miles of Kolkata as the W. Bengal government (GOWB) started culling operations in Hugli district. GOWB also confirmed the presence of the virus in Cooch Behar district in Northern W. Bengal, along the India-Bangladesh border. Hugli and Cooch Behar bring the total number of AI affected districts to 9 out of the state's 18 districts and mean that the disease extends almost the entire length of the state. The GOWB says it is increasing its culling efforts, but it is falling behind in its goal of culling over two million birds within a week. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) Hugli and Cooch Behar became the latest additions to the list of West Bengal districts affected by AI. The H5N1 virus was confirmed in Hugli's Balagarh area, bringing the infection within 20 miles of Kolkata. The state ARD has started culling 5,500 birds in Hugli. In Cooch Behar, the Dinhata II administrative block is also affected. Reports of poultry deaths in Cooch Bihar first arose on January 19. Fecal samples were sent for testing on January 20. After these tested positive, serum was sent for testing on January 21. The GOWB instructed local officials in Cooch Behar to start an awareness campaign and culling.

¶13. (U) One week after official confirmation of the AI outbreak on January 15, state and Indian federal agencies are far behind in achieving their culling targets. GOWB ARD Secretary Dilip Chakraborty told post that the culling target was now a little more than 2 million (reftel). Media reports estimate about 100,000 birds have been found dead in the state, and that 250,000 have been culled by the GOWB. The ARD Secretary said he was increasing the number of culling teams from 300 at present to 600, revising his figure from 500 a day earlier. In seven days, the number of districts affected has increased from two (January 15) to seven (January 22) to nine (January 23).

¶14. (U) A senior ARD official told post that he received instructions to go "all out" and complete culling in the next seven days. However, he said a shortage of veterinary doctors was a constraint to deploying culling teams, as procedural guidelines require the presence of one such doctor in each culling team. To meet the shortage, the GOWB initially planned to deploy one doctor for every three culling teams. Federal ARD officials advised the GOWB, though, to bring in vets and trained culling personnel from other states like Assam, Orissa, Haryana and Rajasthan.

15. (U) Comment: During the past week, GOWB officials have repeatedly claimed that the AI infection in the state is under control. However, every day brings more reports of the disease spreading to new districts. The slow culling, lack of public awareness and poor cooperation with the culling means that the disease will likely continue to spread throughout W. Bengal and possibly to neighboring states.

JARDINE